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Urging an End To Face Branding Of Cattle

Greg Rushford and T.R. Goldman

The full-page *New York Times* advertisement is frightening in its starkness: four black-and-white photographs of the clamped head of a Mexican steer as it is branded in the face. "This is what USDA policy looks like, the ad says. "Can you imagine what *it feels* like?"

The \$19,000 ad, paid for by New York-based Animal Rights International, directs readers to telephone Agriculture Secretary Mike Espy to protest a longstanding U.S. policy of hot-iron branding Mexican steers that are brought across the border.

The graphic photos and message, which appeared March 15, have clearly struck a nerve with the public. "We've gotten lots and lots of calls," says Margaret Webb, a spokeswoman for the Agriculture Department's Animal, Plant and Health Inspection Service (APHIS). "And there's been some very irate people."

A telephone operator in Espy's office says that she and a colleague fielded more than 1,000 calls in the first two days after the ad appeared.

The ad, which also ran a few weeks earlier in *The Washington Times*, was the inspiration of Henry Spira, a longtime animal-rights activist who nearly single-handedly runs Animal Rights International from the living room of his New York apartment.

Spira's campaign was prompted by a proposed federal rule that would extend face branding to Mexican heifers (female calves), in addition to the steers currently being branded.

APHIS veterinarians say the branding is necessary because the 271 Mexican animals have a higher rate of tuberculosis than do U.S. cattle. If an infected animal is discovered, the animal's country of origin—and thus the source of the deadly disease—can be quickly determined.

That's not enough of a justification for Spira. "There's been a general change in the culture over the past few years—that the suffering of animals does matter," says Spira, who was in Washington recently to discuss the possibility of a "Dear Colleague" letter or a congressional resolution against the branding.

APHIS vets acknowledge that the hot-iron branding may not be the best way to label animals. But other methods have their own problems. Microchips implanted in the cattle's ears are considered too costly, and ear tags are thought to be too easy to remove.

"People are dismayed that the government would participate in something like this," says Dr. Richard Rissler, assistant director for operational support in the APHIS veterinarian service. "But what I've been telling them is that the department has for some time been looking at alternatives in how we identify animals."

Spira, whose \$115,000 annual budget is paid by humane societies and foundations, hopes that public pressure will speed the search for those alternatives. And he may have other allies in the fight. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, perhaps the nation's best-known animal-rights group, is trying to develop a federal statute that would outlaw face branding.

Meanwhile, Spira is busy readying a second ad, just as graphic as the first, that may appear later this month. Says Spira: "We want to raise the ante just a little bit more."

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